

# The THOREAU SOCIETY BULLETIN

The Thoreau Society, Inc. is an informal gathering of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. Wendell Glick, Duluth, Minn., president; Mrs. Charles MacPherson, Acton, Mass., vice-president; and Walter Harding, State University, Geneseo, N.Y. 14454, secretary-treasurer. Annual membership \$3.00; life membership, \$100.00. Address communications to the secretary.

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BULLETIN ONE HUNDRED FORTY SEVEN

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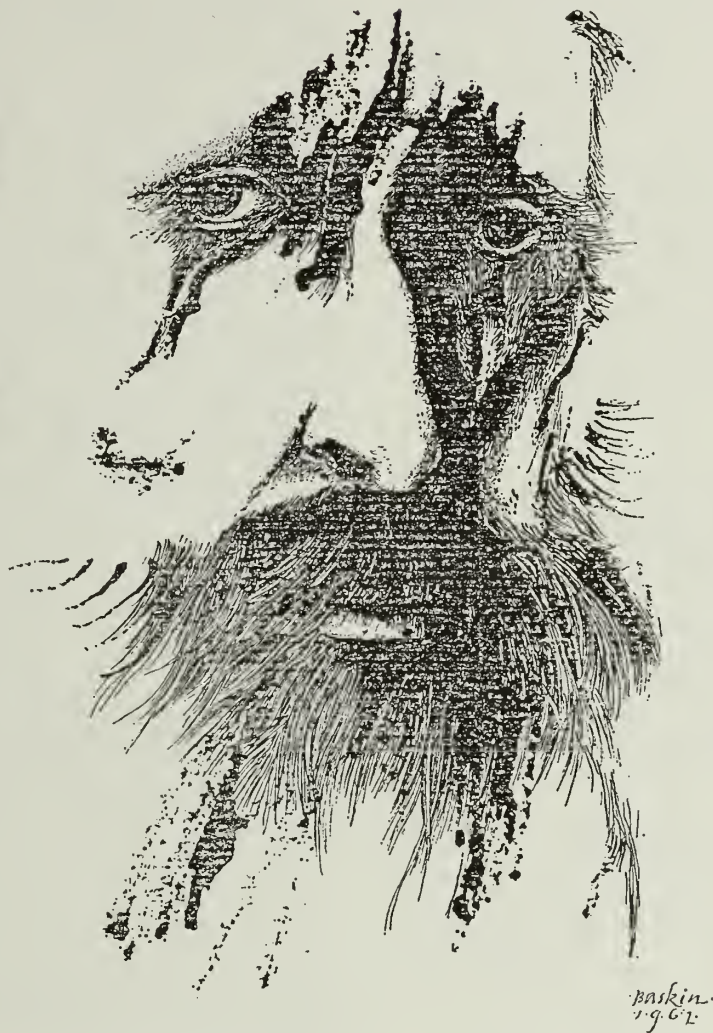
SPRING, 1979

## THE 1979 ANNUAL MEETING . . . . .

This year's annual meeting will be held on Saturday, July 14, 1979, in the First Parish Church in Concord. Speaker of the day will be Frederick Garber of the State University of New York at Binghamton, his topic, "Thoreau as Mental Traveler." (For a review of Garber's new book, see Page 3 of this bulletin.) The president, Wendell Glick, will speak on "The Jersey Thoreaus." Festivities will begin with a coffee hour at 9, business meeting at 10:15, and speakers thereafter. In the afternoon there will be a panel on the Thoreau family with Dana Greeley, Malcolm Ferguson, Marcia Moss, Linda Beaulieu, Thomas Blanding, and Anne McGrath, participating, and, as an alternate, a walk to Punkatasset conducted by Mary Fenn. There will also be the usual tour of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery by Robert Needham and of Concord Free Public Library by Marcia Moss, and a sherry party at the Thoreau Lyceum at 5. In the evening Mary Fenn will show slides of Cape Cod and Caroline Moseley will present a "Lecture/Performance: Some Musical Footnotes to the Study of Thoreau."

At noon a luncheon will be served. Tickets (\$3.75) must be reserved by July 6 through Mrs. Charles MacPherson, 46 Nagog Hill Road, Acton, Mass., 01720.

At 6 p.m., a box supper will be served at the Thoreau Lyceum. Tickets (\$3.25) must be reserved by July 6 through the Thoreau Lyceum, 156 Belknap St.,



HENRY DAVID THOREAU, AET. 44 BY LEONARD BASKIN.  
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Concord, Mass. 01742.

On Friday evening, the 13th, the Thoreau Lyceum will sponsor a lecture at 8:30 by John Clarkson, Jr., on "Thoreau, Frank Sanborn and John Brown." The Lyceum will also conduct an exhibit on "Thoreau's Friends."

On Sunday and Monday, July 15 and 16, Mrs. Eugene Walker will conduct a tour retracing Thoreau's Mount Washington botanical trip of 1858, leaving Concord at 10 a.m. on Sunday and returning late on Monday. They will drive up Mount Washington via the auto road, walk across the alpine garden, and return down the auto road or hike down via the Tuckerman's Ravine Trail. The emphasis will be on Thoreau's botanical observations and they will attempt to find all the species on his list. Because it is necessary to make reservations early, those interested in participating must get in touch with Mrs. Walker by April 30 at 14 Chestnut St., Concord, Mass. 01742 (Tel. 617-369-5393).

For those who wish to make hotel or motel reservations for the week-end, there are the Colon-

ial Inn (in the center of town), the Hawthorne Inn (about a mile out Lexington Road), the Howard Johnson Motel (about two miles out on Route 2) and the Concordian Motel (about four miles out, in Acton).

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"Walden is not presented as a model to follow but one to equal." - James M. Cox.

## THOREAU'S FAITH IN THE EARTH by Arthur Volkman

"...Faith" Henry Thoreau defined in his Journal, "is sight and knowledge...."<sup>1</sup> Very few would question his ability to see, and a reading of Walden will convince anyone that his knowledge was even greater. And knowledge, he declared, "...does not come to us in details, but in flashes of light from heaven...."<sup>2</sup> Presumably one of these flashes kindled his faith, and inspired him to write in Walden, (...Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.)<sup>3</sup> Previous to this, however, he had written in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, "...When the common man looks into the sky, which he has not yet so much profaned, he thinks it less gross than the earth, and with reverence speaks of 'the Heavens,' but the seer in the same sense speaks of 'the Earths,' and his Father who is in them...."<sup>4</sup> The latter quotations seem to warrant the assumption that his faith was in the omnipresent earth.

Nevertheless from his published writings we might categorize him as a Pagan, Deist, Theist, Pantheist or Hindu, etc.,--in fact most anything but an evangelical Christian. For did he not "sign off" from the village traditional church, and after lecturing in an Amherst, N. H., orthodox church write that he "...trusted I helped to undermine it."<sup>5</sup> Admittedly a case could be made for any of Thoreau's sometimes wavering and uncertain beliefs, but he seemed invariably during his creative career to get back to his faith in the "earth." To support this as assertion the following is offered for consideration as evidence.

There need be no disagreement that the components of the "gross necessities of life" are derived from the earth, to which they eventually return to be recycled. Referring to the arrowheads of the American indigenes Thoreau put it thusly: "...When I see these signs I know that the subtle spirits that made them are not far off, into whatever form transmuted."<sup>6</sup> The "subtle spirits" unquestionably included the bodies of the Indians, both flesh and spirit metamorphosed by the agency of the soil. However, he did not limit this idea to the Indians, but applied it to himself as well, and is suggestive of his belief in transmigration between the animate and inanimate, as the excerpts herein-after would imply.

Perhaps Thoreau's first profession of this belief was made in his twenty-third year when he wrote: "I anticipate a more thorough sympathy with nature when my thigh-bones shall strew the ground like the boughs which the wind has scattered--Thus troublesome humors will flower into early anemones, and perhaps in the very lachrymal sinus, nourished by its juices some young pine or oak will strike root."<sup>7</sup> Obviously this is as positive a statement as one can make concerning life after death.

We will here skip over a period of ten years, during which interval I can find nothing in his writings pertinent to the subject, then on June 26, 1851, the following entry appears in the Journal: "...It is unavoidable, the idea of transmigration; not merely a fancy of the poets, but an instinct of the race."<sup>8</sup> And two months later--August 17, 1851--another thought on the subject in the Journal: "...What if I could pray aloud or to myself as I went along by the brooksides a cheerful prayer like the birds! For joy I could embrace the earth; I shall delight to be buried in it."<sup>9</sup> After a lapse of three months without anything relevant, he des-

cribed at length in his Journal a saunter made with Channing, that included a visit to Cochituate Pond --about fifteen miles from Concord: "...Dear to me to lie in this sand; fit to preserve the bones of a race for thousands of years to come. And this is my home, my native soil; and I am a New Englander. Of thee, O earth, are my bones and sinew made; to thee, O sun, am I brother.... To this dust my body will gladly return as to its origin. Here I have my habitat."<sup>10</sup> The next day --November 8, 1851--he returned to the same subject, as though reluctant to leave it: "...When I saw the bare sand at Cochituate I felt my relation to the soil.... In this clean sand my bones will gladly lie. Like Viola pedata [Bird-foot violet] I shall be ready to bloom again in my Indian summer days. Here ever springing, never dying, with perennial root I stand; for the winter of the land is warm to me.... When I see her sands exposed, thrown up from beneath the surface, it touches me inwardly, it reminds me of my origin, so native to New England, methinks, as springs from the sand cast up from below."<sup>11</sup> So important a notion naturally could not escape Walden: "...Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?"<sup>12</sup>

Two entries from the Journal in 1858, are testimony of Thoreau's continuing love for, and faith in, the earth: "You must love the crust of earth on which you dwell more than the sweet crust of any bread or cake. You must be able to extract nutriment out of a sandheap. You must have so good an appetite as this, else you will have lived in vain."<sup>13</sup> And finally, "...I will take another walk to the cliff, another row on the river, another skate on the meadow, be out in the first snow, and associate with the winter birds. Here I am at home. In the bare and bleached crust of the earth I recognize my friend."<sup>14</sup>

The concept of the relationship between animal life--Man--and the inanimate soil is probably as old as civilization. It was recognized by the Greek classical authors and Hindus, both of whose writings were familiar to Thoreau, hence either one may have been the source of his conviction. A twentieth century author Louise D. Rich, seems to have aptly voiced Thoreau's faith in the earth when she wrote in Happy the Land: "...Here [in Maine] I have my feet on the solid earth, literally, and that is good; for it seems to me that the earth is the only permanence we can know. In spite of war and pestilence and destruction, in spite of the unthinkable cruelties man inflicts upon man, in spite of political upheavals and personal disloyalties and treacheries, the earth remains unchanged. The grass grows and the rivers run downhill and the wild berry bushes bear fruit, each in its season. The earth can be depended upon, and unless you take your stance upon a certainty, how can the structure of your life be anything but precarious, a house built upon sand?"<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thoreau, Journal (Boston, 1949), Vol. 1, 248

<sup>2</sup>Thoreau, "Life Without Principle" --A Yankee in Canada, etc. (Boston, 1885) 267

<sup>3</sup>Thoreau, Walden (Boston, 1854) 304

<sup>4</sup>Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, (Boston, 1868) 403

<sup>5</sup>Thoreau, Journal, Vol. IX, 188

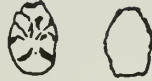
<sup>6</sup>Ibid. Vol. XII, 91

<sup>7</sup>Perry Miller, Consciousness in Concord, (Boston, 1958) 215



- <sup>8</sup>Thoreau, Journal, Vol. II, 271  
<sup>9</sup>Ibid. Vol. II, 381  
<sup>10</sup>Ibid. Vol. III, 95  
<sup>11</sup>Ibid. Vol. III, 97  
<sup>12</sup>Thoreau, Walden (Boston, 1854) 150  
<sup>13</sup>Thoreau, Journal, Vol. X, 258  
<sup>14</sup>Ibid. Vol. XI, 274  
<sup>15</sup>Louise Dickenson Rich, Happy the Land, (Phila., 1946) 256

2-5-1854



THOREAU'S REDEPTIVE IMAGINATION by Frederick Garber. New York: New York University Press, 1977. Reviewed by Wendell Glick (Mr. Garber will speak at the 1979 annual meeting.)

One test of a great author, surely, is the capacity of his genius to transcend time--to present itself anew generation after generation as an instrument of illumination of the self. Thoreau's life in the ultimate was struggle to discover the self, as are the lives of us all; and the enthusiasm with which we return again and again to his account of the poignancy of that search testifies to the universality and endurance of the truths of the human condition that he recorded.

A primary role of the critic, it must follow, is to reveal the elements of the author's genius--to lift to the reader's level of consciousness, insofar as possible, the subtleties the author expressed by tropes and symbols. The result, to those of us who follow in the footprints of the critic, is that the authorial vision which might hitherto have been deeply felt but dimly perceived is made graspable and comprehensible. Great criticism, in short, makes genius understandable.

Such a work of criticism, for this reader, is Frederick Garber's study of the Thoreau imagination. I have read and reread this book with the thrill that comes upon discovering that a cherished author's thought in reality forms a patterned synthesis that I had never before perceived. Thoreau's life takes on a new sphericity (to use Thoreau's metaphor) with Garber's aid, both as an expression of the Romantic Age, and as a microcosm of our universally shared humanity. No other critic in recent years has given me so firm a confidence that I now understand "Where Thoreau lived and What he lived for."

The subtle stages in the odyssey of Thoreau's redemptive imagination, as Garber brings them to light from the chronological record of Thoreau's journal and books, do not lend themselves easily to a brief digest. To one who seeks an ample sense of the narrative of Thoreau's imagination, I can only suggest a reading of Garber's book. Thoreau's perception of his place in his world of 19th Century America, and the relation of that world to his own imagination, was never static; and Garber follows Thoreau's growth of awareness of the difficulties of achieving a unity of imagination and spirit with the "wild" of the New England in which Thoreau lived with perceptiveness and persuasion. I had always thought before reading this book that Thoreau had found in physical nature "pasture sufficient for his imagination"; and that Walden was his most eloquent record of the completeness with which he had succeeded in achieving synthesis of the rhythms of his own mind and experience with the cyclic flow of nature. But Garber (for me), though revealing the

heroic [almost Ahab-like, I am tempted to say] stages in the pattern of Thoreau's struggle to subdue nature to his imaginative needs, shows poignantly his failure to find the self in natural wildness. The resistance Thoreau experienced at the top of Ktaadn, for example, was so formidable as to raise the question as to whether the high demands we make of our world are realizable at all--and if not in nature surely not in the towns and villages man himself has made. The essential aloneness of the human spirit in the world man did not make and the world that he did make is a corollary theme of Garber's book. The book becomes yet another study of the essential American quest of Thoreau--the man above all others whom I had assumed to have succeeded (for himself, at least) to a degree and in a measure that the tortured Melville who could neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief did not. The Thoreau in Garber's book is no easy optimist who refused to look at the bleaker side of experience, no star-gazer with blinders, but another Melville, asking (demanding) more of life in an America full of promises than any land or any time could supply. What a magnificent failure (if failure it can be called) Thoreau's search seems to have been, as Garber so painstakingly reconstructs it, yet it was a failure foreordained, because Thoreau's demands upon nature and experience were so immense as to be unrealizable. I feel an exhilaration from reading Garber's record, and an admiration for Thoreau that I have never felt before, because in his demanding more than life can give, he was able to wring from a recalcitrant, Ktaadn-like "not-me" more than all but a very few persons of genius are able to extract. As "Walking" so beautifully records, he died without despair, sauntering toward the "Holy Land," impelled by a new faith in a new Eden in the eternal West which would be fully commensurate with the claims of his imagination, as the newness and wildness of America had not.

All students of the deeper meanings of Thoreau's genius should read this book. I for one know now, better than ever before, why his appeal for me has always been so deep. What he was seeking for in the wild, Melville sought for on the sea and Sam Clemens on the river. Thoreau moved far beyond Emerson's calm early faith that the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, to perceive, as did Wallace Stevens, the tension between the "green" and the "blue," the world and the human mind. He was an intrepid voyager, a teller of the truth, who found the purification of self in telling truthfully what he found, the inevitable disparity between what we seek in this life and what we can have. But since he sought honestly, without deception, his search yielded not bitterness, but joy.



2-11-1854

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- Porte, Joel. REPRESENTATIVE MAN: RALPH WALDO EMERSON IN HIS TIME. New York: Oxford, 1979. 361 pp. A fine new study with a chapter on the relations of Thoreau and Emerson.
- Richardson, Robert D., Jr. Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance (Bloomington: Univ. of Ind. Press, 1978. 309 pp.) I have been bothered in recent years by what have seemed to me some pretty far-fetched myth interpretations of Thoreau, and yet it is perfectly obvious to anyone who reads Thoreau with thought that myth was important to him. At last there is a worthwhile and illuminating study of myth in Thoreau and perhaps its success lies in the fact that it approaches Thoreau through a study of nineteenth century attitudes towards myth rather than twentieth century. At any rate, after an amazingly detailed study of the students of myth and mythology on both sides of the Atlantic of a hundred and fifty or more years ago, Richardson goes on to an analy-



sis of myth in Thoreau (and Emerson, Whitman, Melville and Hawthorne) that is absolutely refreshing in its sanity and clarity. His discussions of the impact of Indic, Greek, and Nordic myth on Thoreau and his analyses of the use of myth by Thoreau in A Week, The Maine Woods, and Walden are all enlightening. His discussion of Thoreau's reactions to his ascent of Katahdin is a healthy antidote to some of the more overblown studies of the past and his discussion of Walden is one of the more illuminating I've read in some time. I shall quote only a few sentences from the book:

Not only did Thoreau see that the usefulness of myth to him depended on his recovering for himself the original and essential individual conditions of myth, but he also developed a technique for handling myth, which he articulated in a way that throws a good deal of light on his literary purpose. Since fact and fable stood at opposite poles in most people's minds, Thoreau hit upon the device of always leading fables or myths towards facts and always leading his facts towards fable or myth. In this way he could play on his readers' stock responses and could press continually forward, in unlooked for ways, his own conviction that myth is deeply and importantly true.

A very worthwhile book, one not to be overlooked.

Saito, Shigeru. "The Wild Man in Concord" in MY DAYS, MY WAY. Nagano, Japan: Sanjo-sha, 1967. pp. 207-360. A hitherto unnoticed biography of Thoreau, text in Japanese, written by a self-taught early enthusiast. We understand it is a very sympathetic and understanding portrait. Also includes, p. 206, Saito's 1911 etching "The Idea of Walden" reproduced on this page.

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〔ワルデン〕のアイデア



バーナード・リーチ (明治四十四年)

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#### BACK COPIES

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Available from the State University of New York Press in Albany is a hardcover edition of Booklet #21 (The Thoreau Centennial) for \$5.00; and from the University of Mass. Press in Amherst, a hardcover of Booklet #17 (Thoreau in our Season) for \$4.50. A reprint of the first hundred bulletins in hardcover is available from the Johnson Reprint, 111 Fifth Ave., NYC, 10003 for \$15. Microfilms of all bulletins are available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich.

1-3-54

#### DANA MC LEAN GREELEY: PRESIDENT-ELECT AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I was born in the neighboring town to Concord, namely Lexington, in 1908. And even at that distance in a rival community, did hear of Henry David Thoreau when I was still a young boy. I attended Lexington schools, and Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School, and have had churches in Lincoln, Mass., Concord, N.H., Boston (the Arlington Street Church), and Concord, Mass. I am married and have four daughters and four sons-in-law, and ten grandchildren. I was President of the American Unitarian Association and the new Unitarian Universalist Association of North America for eleven years, and President also of a liberal religious world organization, the International Association for Religious Freedom. And I have been a founder and co-chairman of the World Conference of Religion for Peace, which has consumed much of my interest and much of my time in recent years. In Selma, Alabama, and at Montgomery, and in New Delhi, India, and Japan, as well as even in Moscow, I was happy and proud always to hear of Henry David Thoreau, and his enormous influence on such people as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Ghandi, Leo Tolstoy,

and other great reformers and civil disobedience advocates or practitioners. I had the pleasure of knowing some of the officers of the Thoreau Society very well, such as Fred Piper, and Raymond Adams, from the earliest days, and Fred McGill, a recent president, a life-long friend. When I came to Concord people like Ruth Wheeler and Robert Needham (but why do I say like these people, because there aren't very many others like Ruth Wheeler and Bob Needham) immediately interested me further in Thoreau. And with Bertha Joslin and Esther Anderson (both founders) and Mary Fenn and Malcolm Ferguson and the Moores and the Klincks as my parishioners, how could I do anything else prudently but pay my continuing respects to Thoreau? I soon realized of course that he was Concord's greatest native citizen. Maybe with the passing of the generations his star has risen higher in the heavens than that of his older friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who many have considered to be the greatest thinker in American history. But Emerson was not a true Concordian, because although his parents and his children were born in Concord, he was born in Boston. Thoreau was born a true Concordian and a true Universalist.

I shall do my best to be true to the tradition of Thoreau Society Presidents.

2-12-54

#### THOREAU AND THE "EMINENT SCAMP" by Martin Doudna

Near the end of "The Last Days of John Brown" Thoreau quotes six lines of verse to describe Brown's manner of meeting his death:

'He nothing common did or mean  
Upon that memorable scene,  
Nor called the gods with vulgar spite,  
To vindicate his helpless right;  
But bowed his comely head  
Down as upon a bed.'

Thoreau does not identify the source of these lines nor indicate to whom they originally referred. To have done so would have been awkward. For a few paragraphs earlier Thoreau had exclaimed indignantly;

When I looked into a liturgy of the Church of England . . . to find a service applicable to the case of Brown, I found that the only martyr recognized and provided for by it was King Charles the First, an eminent scamp. . . . What a satire on the Church is that!

It is no surprise, then, to find Thoreau failing to mention that the lines he has used to honor Brown are taken from Andrew Marvell's "Horatian Ode, upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland" and that they describe the death scene of the man Thoreau had just referred to as "an eminent scamp," Charles I.

Thoreau cannot be accused of using Marvell's words in ignorance of their context. His immediate source for them was undoubtedly the notebook in which he had copied them out some twenty years earlier, and in which they are headed "Charles. --" On a less solemn occasion the incongruous juxtaposition of such contradictory references to King Charles might have been Thoreau's way of having a bit of innocent fun at his readers' expense. But on the subject of John Brown, Thoreau was deadly serious. And since to reveal the inappropriate original application of



the verses he had quoted to honor Brown would have undercut his passionate apotheosis of the anti-slavery martyr, Thoreau chose in this instance to act as a bit of a scamp himself. Hilo College

<sup>1</sup>As transcribed in Kenneth W. Cameron, The Transcendentalists and Minerva (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1958) 1: 273.

2-12-54

#### DOWN THE BAY SIDE by Mary Gail Fenn

It is somewhat of a disappointment to a Cape Cod enthusiast that Henry Thoreau did not have more to say about the half of the Cape he referred to in his chapter "Stage Coach Views": from the village of Sandwich to that of Orleans or, if you will, the shoulder to the elbow of "the bare and bended arm." A crowded stage on a rainy day was not conducive to an exploration of one's surroundings, it is true, but the real reason of course was that, "We did not care to see those features of the Cape in which it is inferior or merely equal to the mainland, but only those in which it is peculiar or superior. We cannot say how its towns look in front to one who goes to meet them. We went to see the ocean behind them."

The town of Sandwich, which Thoreau claimed was looking that day in 1849 like "half a Sandwich at most and that must have fallen on the buttered side" is today still considered one of the most beautiful towns on the Cape and is most assuredly butter side up. Its center is graced by a mill pond with its resident flock of ducks, a 1654 grist mill, herring run and its Sandwich Glass Museum. Thoreau observed that the glass works settled in town "to improve its sand." Actually, the local sand was found to be too gritty and the company had to import its sand from the Berkshires, the Hudson, the New Jersey coast and even from France. The copious supply of pine wood for the furnaces was another drawing card.

Later Thoreau was to experience a further contact with the glass works. After the arrival of the railroad in 1848, Sandwich glass was shipped to Boston by train but Mr. Deming Jarves of the glass works had a falling out with the railroad and decided to have a company steamship built to avoid the freight charges in addition to providing more space in the hold. Railroad superintendent Bourne sneered that, "The acorn is not yet planted to grow the timber for such a vessel", but built it was, and Jarves gleefully christened the ship "Acorn". It was the steamer Acorn of Sandwich that Thoreau boarded in 1857 to return home from a subsequent trip to the Cape. Some years later the Acorn was sold and used as a blockade runner during the Civil War until it was accidentally sunk off the Carolina coast.

A stage coach view lost in the late 1800s was the saltworks; they were on the decline when Thoreau visited. Sea water was pumped by windmill power into large table like vats fitted with low pitched roofs that could be pulled over them in the event of rain. It is said to have taken 350 gallons of sea water to yield one bushel of salt which would have sold for about forty cents in Thoreau's day. The Bourne Historical Society has built two solar evaporation vats at their reconstruction of the 1627 Aptuxet Trading Post, where the New York Dutch, the Indians, and the Pilgrims traded. Water is taken from the adjoining Cape Cod Canal and the resulting salt is for sale to tourists who visit Aptuxet.

"The rough hill of Scargo" in the town of Dennis was noted by Thoreau as the highest land on the Cape. About 1912 a stone observation tower was built on top. Today Scargo is being built up to houses which cling to the side of the hill overlooking Scargo Lake and the Indian Burying Ground nearby.

Stage coach service on the Cape began about 1800 with a series of taverns or inns along the route where travellers could spend the night. One of these was the Higgins Tavern in Orleans. Built in 1829, it also served as a relay station for the mail. Coaches arrived several times a week from Sandwich for they were the only public means of transportation for many years. The Cape Cod railroad from which Thoreau disembarked at Sandwich in 1849 had reached that town only the year before and would not arrive at Orleans until 1865, taking another eight years to stretch the distance to Provincetown in 1873. It was Higgins Tavern that played host to Thoreau and Channing on their 1849 trip. Today the Olde Tavern Motel of Orleans claims the honor and upon investigation it appears that the South Wing of the Higgins Tavern survived a fire in the 1930s and was moved across the street to its present location, where it serves, rather aptly, as the office for a modern hostelry. Inside hang the portraits of Thoreau's host, Captain Simeon Higgins, and Mrs. Higgins. The motel's brochure tells of Thoreau's visit including a quote from Cape Cod. Such discoveries reward the present day Thoreauvian who travels the route taken by Henry David Thoreau 130 years ago.



2-12-54

#### THOREAU'S MYRMIDONS by Thomas Hahn

In his celebrated description of the battle of the ants (Walden XII, "Brute Neighbors"), Thoreau includes an allusion to which, so far as I know, no reader has called attention. He writes, "The legions of these Myrmidons covered all the hills and vales in my wood-yard" (p. 174), and later he compares a newly arrived ant to "some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come to avenge or rescue his Patroclus" (p. 175; all quotations from Walden, ed. Walter Harding [New York, 1962]). Thoreau unmistakably refers here, and at a number of other places in the description, to events of the Trojan War, and these allusions have been properly identified by Professor Harding and other editors. However, the reference to Myrmidons works on levels of meaning other than the historical, and these have escaped notice.

Several ancient writers tell the story of the Myrmidons' origins, and Thoreau may well have known Ovid's version in the Metamorphoses. The tale begins when Juno sends a plague to destroy the people who live under the rule of Aeacus. The distraught Aeacus asks that his father Jove either destroy him or restore his population. Aeacus receives a favorable omen and, noticing columns of ants bringing food up and down the trunk of an oak, he prays that he may have as many subjects as there are ants before him. That night he dreams:

Before my eyes the same oak-tree seemed to stand, with just as many branches and with just as many creatures on its branches, to shake with the same motion, and to scatter the grain-bearing column on the ground

below. These seemed suddenly to grow larger and ever larger, to raise themselves from the ground and stand with form erect, to throw off their leanness, their many feet, their black colour, and to take on human limbs and a human form. Then sleep departed. . . . I went without, and there just such men as I had seen in my dream I now saw and recognized with my waking eyes. They approached and greeted me as a king. I gave thanks to Jove, and and to my new subjects I portioned out my city and my fields, forsaken by their former occupants; and I called them Myrmidons, nor did I cheat the name of its origin. (*Metamorphoses*, ed. F. J. Miller, Loeb Classical Library [London, 1916] vol. 1, pp. 386-389.)

The Ovidian story and the passage in *Walden* turn on the identity of ants and men. The allusion to the Myrmidons consequently establishes an equivalence between the two. As Thoreau says, "I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had been men. The more you think of it, the less the difference" (p. 175).

We may surely assume that Thoreau intended this punning allusion, for even if he had not read an ancient account of the Myrmidons he would have encountered the pun in the source he cites in this chapter, *An Introduction to Entomology*, by William Kirby and William Spence (p. 176). The authors refer to combat between ants as a "Myrmidonomachia" (p. 327); they present such battle as an "exhibition of Myrmidonian valour" (p. 328; I quote the seventh edition [London, 1856], which retains this material from earlier editions). The *Introduction* was a popular work that went through many issues, and the authors obviously included heavy-handed puns of this sort to lighten their material. The larger subject of the relation between Thoreau's narrative and this particular source invites further comment, and I am at present completing a paper that compares the two.

The use of "Myrmidons" may be taken as another instance in which Thoreau conveys, or complicates, his meaning through the use of wordplay. Michael West (*PMLA* 89 [1974] 1043-1046) has recently argued that an analysis of *Walden* demonstrates that Thoreau used puns and double entendres to emphasize the fundamental ambivalence of his outlook. On the first level, "Myrmidons" adds to the heroic tone that Thoreau strives for in this description; on a second level, it appears in this context to be mock heroic. But "Myrmidons" also carried another, anti-heroic meaning, and this adds a further dimension to the passage. Already by the seventeenth century, in Milton and Pepys for example, "Myrmidon" had taken on the connotation of henchman or hireling (*OED* furnishes examples from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries). The word might therefore describe not merely those who acted from loyalty to a person or a cause, but those who acted for baser motives, without a genuine cause.

In the course of his narrative, Thoreau refers to the ants' "Pertinacity" (p. 174) and their "ferocity" (p. 176); he writes, "There was not one hireling there. I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a three-penny tax on their tea" (p. 175). Such passages make us conscious of a double meaning: the ants are at one time senselessly brutal yet beyond reproach in their motives. As a result,

the vocabulary, the allusions, the metaphors and similes in the passage--which everywhere erect a complicated comparison with human behavior--ironically imply that as henchmen people outdo the ants, while as idealists they fall short. The several possible, or simultaneous, meanings of "Myrmidons" contribute heavily to the complexity of this section of *Walden*. The delicate and cutting irony its use achieves separates *Walden* from its more ephemeral source. This ambiguity helps Thoreau show us that war is somehow both mortifying and exciting. Like much else in *Walden*, it probes the profound and profoundly ambiguous relations between nature and human life. UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

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## NOTES AND QUERIES

We are indebted to Frank Bramley of Hancock, N.H. for presenting the society archives color slides of the 1968 annual meeting and to Roscoe A. Poland of San Diego, Calif. for a copy of the Hurst edition of Thoreau's *WEEK*.

Cody's Bookstore, 2454 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley, Calif. have issued another of their Thoreau quotation calendars for 1979.

The March, 1979 issue of *AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY* has a striking full-page reproduction of the Marxham daguerreotype, and the October, 1978, issue of *SKY* has the only colored photograph of it we have ever seen.

The BOSTON GLOVE has issued a beautiful 1979 calendar, "Invitation to Poets' Pilgrimage," of which the July page is devoted to Thoreau with a lovely new drawing of the cabin.

Robert Levenson (PO Box 7461, S. Lake Tahoe, Cal. 95731, a professional photographer and a member of the society, has taken a particularly beautiful color photograph of Walden Pond which he will reprint (5x7) for any member at the cost of \$2.25, postpaid.

The Walden Pond Advisory Committee for the Walden Pond State Reservation is working on plans to reduce the amount of swimming at the pond in order to prevent the pond's destruction, according to the *CONCORD JOURNAL* of Jan. 18, 1979. On selected Sundays tours of the pond, leaving the parking lot at 1 p.m., are conducted by Dorothy Zug of the reservation staff.

An eight pound, 13½ oz. brown trout was recently caught in Walden Pond.

A *WEEK* and volume 1 of the *JOURNAL* of the new edition of Thoreau will be available from Princeton University Press in August at \$22.50 each.

## THE NOMINATING COMMITTEE

The nominating committee: Malcolm Ferguson, J. Parker Huber, Eugene Walker, and Linda Beaulieu, chairman, present the following slate of officers for the 1979 election at the annual meeting: Rev. Dana McLean Greeley of Concord, president; Mrs. Thomas McGrath of Concord, president-elect; Mrs. Charles MacPherson of Acton, vice-president; Walter Harding of Geneseo, New York, secretary-treasurer, all for terms of one year; and Mary Gail Fenn of Concord and August Black of Morris, Ill., members of the executive committee for three years. Further nominations may be made from the floor at the annual meeting. Any business to be presented at the annual meeting should be in the secretary's hands prior to the executive committee meeting on July 13.